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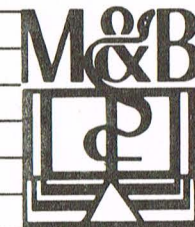
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## FIRST INTERNATIONAL SYMPOSIUM on MEDICINE in the BIBLE

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Jerusalem, August 23-27, 1981



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## Chairman's Introductory Remarks

This Symposium is, to the best of my knowledge, the first attempt at discussing the topic "Medicine in the Bible" before an unbiased international forum. I understand that our intellectual effort is directed toward historical investigation rather than toward pure theology.

The participants had full freedom of attitude in their research. As for the editorial policy, we restricted our intervention to preventing the potential reader from too painful an offense, in case of extreme and daring statements. The fact that the Symposium was the first of its kind may also account for a certain inequality in the level of the papers.

Within the frame of these brief introductory remarks, I would like to review previous contributions on the topic of biblical medicine. These are, firstly, books on medical items in the Old Testament composed by Jews and Christians in the 17th to 19th centuries. The authors were physicians, sometimes of considerable renown in their time, such as Bartholinus or Mead, and motivated both by medical and religious incentives. Secondly, we have to consider formal commentaries on parts or the whole of the Hebrew Bible, and even one compilation by Bacher in 1896 of collected comments scattered throughout other writings of Maimonides.

These commentators were mostly Jewish physicians, although their fame was gained in fields other than medicine. Only two of them remained all their lives in the class of practising physicians: R. Abraham son of Maimonides, whose Arabic commentary on the first two books of the Pentateuch have been edited with a Hebrew translation by E.J. Wiesenbergl (London 1958); and R. Obadia Sforno (16th century), who in the posthumous first edition of his commentary was exuberantly named "Knight of physicians." Prominent in the biblical exegesis are Nahmanides (13th century) and Gersonides (14th century), and a study of their works could be rewarding to the field of medico-historical research. All these works, as well as the



## ZELEM (IMAGE) AND MEDICINE IN THE LURIANIC TEACHING\*\*

(According to the Writings of R. Hayim Vital)

Ronit Meroz\*

The saintly Rabbi Yizhak Luria died in Safed of the plague in 1572 at the age of 38. This misfortune is said to have befallen him because of a spiritual sin, namely: his premature revelation of a certain kabbalistic secret.<sup>1</sup>

R. Yizhak Luria has left hardly any writings, but he did leave many disciples. From among them the prolific R. Vital (1542-1620) claims to be the most authoritative source for the esoteric doctrine of his teacher.

Before going into details, I would like to point out that a systematic knowledge of medicine was of no special interest to R. Hayim Vital. The paragraph closest to a systematic approach appears in Sha'ar HaGilgulim (the Gate of Transmigrations of Souls)<sup>2</sup> and consists of a list of ten medicinal herbs — five of them, interestingly enough, against eye diseases, but also including one for the purpose of "the alchemy of gold".

Nevertheless, we *do* find in Vital's writings many details related to medicine. Their analysis reveals an implicit, but nevertheless comprehensive, even unique, theory of disease and therapy. This centers on the concept of Zelem (Image), after Genesis 1,26: "Let Us make man in Our image, in Our likeness".

The Zelem is one of the corner-stones of the Lurianic esoteric system as represented by R. Hayim Vital<sup>3</sup>. It appears again and again in all its aspects — ontology, psychology, ethics and the theory of prophecy. The main feature of the Zelem in all these respects is its being an intermediary bet-

ween different levels of Being in the Godhead or Creation, or between body and soul<sup>4</sup>.

In the doctrine of the soul it serves as an astral body, the model of which is given in Ezekiel's visions of God in the form of a man surrounded by radiating light (Chap. 1 & 8).

The Zohar (the holiest book of the Kabbalah) mentions that a person has one Zelem and sometimes mentions two Zalamim, called shadows<sup>5</sup>.

Vital thinks of these as *three* separate Zalamim and, unlike anyone else before him in the Jewish tradition, states: "There are three aspects ... below the level of the soul ... and these are three shadows in man"<sup>6</sup>. (Incidentally, Vital does not distinguish between Zalamim and shadows).

In keeping with the many traditions concerning the astral body, Vital defines the main function of the lowest shadow as a life principle<sup>7</sup>. The foetus receives it from its parents<sup>8</sup>. Due to its existence, the body comes into being, grows and stays alive<sup>9</sup>. When the shadow departs, the body dies. One can discern this shadow in the light of the moon; if it cannot be seen, this shows that the person is going to die within thirty days<sup>10</sup>.

A second function of this shadow is that it provides protection against the forces of evil — physically and spiritually<sup>11</sup>.

The functions of the lowest shadow suffice to explain why some women cannot give birth: they are the incarnation of souls of men. The mother element in the Zelem of the child-to-be is missing, and therefore it cannot come into being. Under some very special conditions, though, an additional feminine soul will enter the body of the woman and will make possible the conception and birth of a daughter. Unfortunately, no practical method to achieve this is indicated and we are told that "great merits and many miracles" are needed<sup>12</sup>.

The main innovative element in Vital's concept of the Zelem appears in the Gate of the Zelem in *Etz Hayim* (Gate 26). Here we find that the astral bodies are made of "sparks" — that is, souls — immersed in the forces of evil. It should be explained that according to the Lurianic myth, several catastrophes have happened in the course of cosmic history — each of them causing more "sparks of holiness"

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\*\* This article is partly based on the author's M.A. thesis — "Aspects in the Lurianic Doctrine of Prophecy" (in Hebrew) submitted to the Hebrew University. I wish to thank Dr. M. Idel, who was my instructor in the preparation of the thesis.



to sink into, and be captured by, the forces of evil — the *Klippot*. The goal of history is the complete liberation of the sparks, their purification from the dross, and re-integration into the original whole<sup>13</sup>. As Vital puts it: "And you should know that when a spark begins to purify itself ... it is impossible (for it) to become a perfect inner soul, unless it first appears three times in the function of a Zelem ... and afterwards it becomes a real inner soul ... Therefore we find that the Zelem is an inner soul, but it is not yet restored until three times over, and therefore the soul comes and clothes itself in it"<sup>14</sup>.

What we have here is a reciprocal relation between the soul and its astral bodies.

On the other hand, when a spark is just beginning to free itself from the grip of the *Klippot*, it is not yet strong enough to purify itself. Therefore it assumes the function of an astral body for another soul. Through living by the commandments and through ethical conduct, the other soul — the "inner soul" as Vital calls it — purifies both itself and its astral body. This enables the spark undergoing purification to serve as a higher shadow in the next life, until it becomes capable of independently purifying itself. On the other hand, the purer the Zelem is, the stronger are the forces of holiness in it, and therefore it can provide a better protection for the inner soul.

Another element of original thinking in the theory expounded by Vital is that the higher two *Zelamim* embody the good and evil nature of man<sup>15</sup>. They too provide protection against the evil forces, but this characteristic of theirs emphasizes the dependence of man's physical health on his moral condition.

This understanding of the astral bodies as consisting of sparks of souls makes it into a link with a different explanatory system — that of possession by other souls. In Hebrew, this is most commonly known by the word *Dibbuk*<sup>16</sup>, but *Ibbur* or *Gilgul* are the words used by Vital. This point will be clearer if we elaborate somewhat.

In kabbalistic doctrines we find not only one spiritual entity — the Nefesh, soul — but the potential co-existence of five spiritual entities: *Nefesh*, *Ruah*, *Neshama*, *Haya*, *Yehida*.

The necessity of an intermediary exists not only between body and soul — but between any two spiritual entities. Thus we need more *Zelamim*, between the Nefesh and *Ruah*, *Ruah* and *Neshama*, and so forth. As such might serve soul-sparks which have already lived at least one life-span as an inner soul. They are incarnate in, or possess the present inner soul either permanently or temporarily.

As a matter of fact, the picture we receive is rather simple: A human being is an agglomerate of sparks. Some are brighter and purer, others are overshadowed by the evil forces, the *Klippot*. The lowest one is a physical life principle. The somewhat higher ones have psychological inclinations towards either good or evil. The highest ones, finally, have spiritual functions. The real self, the individuality, is the inner soul at the center of all these sparks. In general it would be correct to state that the more sparks a person has and the brighter they are, the higher is his spiritual rank, and vice versa. The sinner has fewer sparks and what is more — they are more heavily contaminated and overcast by the evil forces. At each of the levels just mentioned, several new sparks or *Klippot* might join, or depart, depending on the person's deeds. Thus, the very structure of the soul and its astral bodies makes possible the phenomenon of possession.

The new sparks by which the inner soul is possessed might be of an evil nature. In such cases they might harm the person physically or insert evil inclinations into his mind.

On the other hand, pious life entails the possibility of being possessed by righteous souls, who will reveal esoteric knowledge of the Torah.

All the sparks which join the inner soul on the ground of 'positive motivation', if one could say so, belong to one 'family' or 'root' of souls. Originally, in the beginning, they were one big spark, but the cosmic catastrophes mentioned before, as well as human sins, caused this big spark to split up into many small ones. The spiritual development of a person aims at the re-integration of all the related small sparks into one big Self. Vital, no doubt, viewed this state also as one of psychological integration and mental health<sup>17</sup>.



Let us now give two examples of the principles delineated so far.

In the 38th Chapter of Sha'ar HaGilgulim, Vital tells the following story:

"In the year 1572, we [Rabbi Luria and himself] went out into the fields, and we passed the tomb of an ancient Gentile, more than a thousand years old. And he [the Gentile's soul] saw my soul at his tomb and wished to kill me and harm me; and there were many angels and souls of the righteous, beyond imagination, to my right and left, and he could not overcome me; and my teacher ... instructed me that on my way back I should not go the same way. And the soul of the Gentile followed me, but from a distance. And there in the fields, I grew angry with Rabbi Yehuda Mischean [— and anger is the gravest sin!] And the Gentile's soul started to cling to me and made me sin even more and I didn't want to listen to the preaching of my teacher... [This makes clear what happens when the Zelem's *spiritual* protection is withdrawn<sup>18</sup>.] And he [my teacher] began to weep and he said: 'All the souls of the righteous and the angels departed because of anger and this is the reason why that soul [of the Gentile] overcame him [i.e. Vital]. What shall I do? Let us hope he [the Gentile] only harms him but leaves him alive, since then I could cure him but I fear he will kill him' ... and he [Rabbi Luria] did not eat all night because of his grief and worry.

"And I did return alone along the very same path, and when I went by his tomb [the second time] a wind lifted me up and I saw myself running in the air — above the earth — twenty times the height of man — until I arrived back in the town at dusk and, left to myself, I went to sleep a healthy man and slept until dawn. And when I wanted to get up, all my limbs were very weak ... and [my friends] lead me slowly to my teacher's door. And when I arrived there, no spirit was left in me ... and my teacher ... lay me down on his bed and closed the door and prayed ... and later on he [repeatedly] leaned over me [as Elisha did!] until midday, and all that time I was completely dead. And at midday, I myself noticed that my spirit was slowly returning to me."

In the other of Vital's descriptions of cases of possession we find not only coma but also violent spontaneous physical movements and automatic speech<sup>19</sup>.

The second example concerns food and drink.

The *real* reason for eating, we are told, in the Gate of Commandments, portion of 'Ekev, is the separation of the holy from the dross to be found in the food. But only the righteous who know how to practise the right *Kawwanot* (that is, mystical intentions) can accomplish this. The sinners, or even those ignorant of the kabbalistic secrets, might be gripped, and led astray, by the *Klippot* hidden in the food, or might even be possessed by souls which are incarnate in it. Meat is of special danger, but we also hear how careful Luria was when drinking water from wells and cisterns<sup>20</sup>.

We have thus seen that an integrated theory of the concepts of astral body and possession serves to explain many phenomena of physical and mental health, and it should be pointed out that no clear distinction is drawn between the two. Disease, healing and well-being can be represented as dependent on the association and dissociation of sparks or *Klippot*.

Redemption of the sparks is a cosmic process; yet it has great relevance to the life of the individual. It is the *individual*, who, due to some imbalance between the holy and the evil in himself might suffer coma, weakness, shivering, insanity or melancholy<sup>21</sup>.

Needless to say that in the context of the system just described, preventive medicine, as well as therapy are not corporeal but of spiritual nature, such as prayer, repentance and mystical meditation. In Vital's writings, we find such meditations called *Tikkunim* aimed at purifying the soul from certain sins<sup>22</sup>.

Concerning diagnosis: Luria — and Luria only — had the charismatic ability of actually seeing this agglomerate of sparks and thereby recognizing the person's merits and sins. He saw them sparkling on the forehead<sup>23</sup>.

Another method, which he apparently also passed on to Vital and the latter's son, Shemuel, was checking the pulse.



The exact details of this method, however, are not specified<sup>24</sup>.

Let us conclude with Vital's own words taken from his diary, the Book of Visions<sup>25</sup>:

"In that year [1575], my brother, Rabbi Moshe, fell ill and my teacher, of blessed memory, told me in my dream that I should make a special *Kawwanah* for his sake during the prayer for health [the eighth benediction of the daily 'Amidah], when saying the words 'the healer of the sick among his people of Israel'. Since after adding one, Rofé ['healer'] in *Gimmatria* [that is, the numerical value of these letters] equals 288 sparks [this is said to be the number of the captive sparks] which are the source of the diseases. And I should have the *Kawwanah* [intention] that these 288 will be mended and sweetened [that is, purified] and thereby recovery will be brought to the sick."

## Notes

- 1 Benayahu, Sefer Toledoth Ha'ari, Jerusalem, 1967, p. 200.
- 2 The edition of the Research Center of Kabbalah, Jerusalem, 1978, chap. 36, p. 124. Further references to Sha'ar HaGilgulim, abbreviated: S.G.
- 3 A fuller account appears in my thesis.
- 4 Sefer HaGilgulim, Przemyśl, 1875, chap. 69. Further references abbreviated: Se.G.
- 5 III, 43 a, b; 104 a, b and see Scholem, G. Elements of the Kabbalah and its Symbolism, Jerusalem, 1967, chap. 10, pp. 368-374 (in Hebrew). Further references abbreviated to — Elements.
- 6 Sha'ar Hakawwanot, Jerusalem, 1902. Sukkot, homily 6. Further references abbreviated: S.K.
- 7 Ibid; Scholem G., ibid, p. 370; Walker D.P.: The Astral Body in Renaissance Medicine, Journal of the Warburg & Courtauld Institutes, 1958(22); Dan J., Torath Hasod Shel Hasidei Ashkenaz, Jerusalem, 1968, p. 224 ff.
- 8 'Ez Hayim, Tel-Aviv, 1960, Gate 20, chap. 5. Further references abbreviated: E.H.
- 9 S.K., Sukkot, homilies 6, 7.
- 10 Ibid, homily 6; Wilhelm J.D.: Sidrei Tikkunim, in 'Aleí 'Ayin, The Salman Schocken Jubilee Volume, 1948-1952, pp. 125-146.
- 11 S.K., Sukkot, homily 7.
- 12 S.G., chap. 9, 38; E.H., Gate 20, chap 5.
- 13 For a more detailed account see Scholem, G.: Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism, London, 1955, chap. 7 and Tishby, Y.: Torath Hara' Vehaklippah Bekabbalah Ha'ari, Jerusalem, 1971.

- 14 E.H., Gate 26, chap. 2.
- 15 Ibid, chap. 1.
- 16 See G. Nigal's article on the 'Dibbuk' in the Jewish Mysticism, Da'at (4) 1980, pp. 75-101, and his book: The Hassidic Tale, Its History and Topics, Jerusalem, 1981, chap. 9, pp. 185-203.
- 17 See above note 14 and Scholem: Elements, chap. 9, as well as my aforementioned thesis.
- 18 See also S.G., chap. 22.
- 19 S.G., chap. 38; Sefer Haḥezyonot, Eshkoly's edition, Jerusalem, 1954 (further references abbreviated S.H.), p. 19.
- 20 For more examples see S.H., p. 19-20, 63; S.G. chap. 38; Sha'ar Ruah Hakodesh, Jerusalem, 1912 (further references abbreviated to — S.R.K.), p. 11a; Luria's Shulhan Arukh, Jerusalem, 1961, p. 111.
- 21 S.G., chap. 27, 38.
- 22 Especially in S.R.K.
- 23 S.R.K., p. 3, 4, 5b; S.G., chap. 38.
- 24 S.R.K., p. 3a, 34a.
- 25 S.R.K., p. 60.